



## **BRIEFING MEMO**

DATE: October 1, 2013  
TO: Board of Park Commissioners  
FROM: David Graves, Senior Planner  
SUBJECT: Bicycle Policy Update

### **Requested Board Action**

Parks staff is requesting that the Board of Park Commissioners recommend approval of the proposed updated Bicycle Policy.

### **Background**

Parks adopted the current Bicycle Policy in 1995 when mountain bikes were in their infancy. Riding a bicycle off-road was a new concept and one that was not supported by a large percentage of recreational users. Fast forward to 2013 and the landscape has changed significantly. The use of bicycles both on and off-road has grown exponentially. Bicycle technology has changed and trail design and usage has changed too. Bicycles ridden off-road initially took advantage of old hiking, logging and mining trails, depending on the location. Today there is a well-established set of trail standards utilized by land managers across the country to afford off-road recreational opportunities for bicycles while limiting the potential for any negative impacts as a result of that access.

Parks current policy regarding bicycles is almost twenty years old.

### **Staff Recommendation**

Mountain bikes are a legitimate recreational use. Currently, there are no soft surface "single track" trails that are open to bicycle use in the City of Seattle. Parks staff recommends updating Parks Bicycle Policy to allow bicycles in Parks' Greenbelts and Natural Areas on trails that have been designed and constructed to Parks' Mountain Bike Trail Standards. Today, bicycle use is limited to roads and multi-use pathways in some parks. The proposed updates to the policy would allow bicycle use in Parks' natural areas/greenbelts such as the West Duwamish and Cheasty Greenbelts **only** on trail(s) built or improved to Parks' Mountain Bike Trail Design Standards. Bicycle use would continue to be limited to paved surfaces in Discovery and Schmitz Parks and the Washington Park Arboretum and limited to trails 60-inches or wider in Ravenna, Carkeek, Seward, Interlaken and Lincoln Parks as outlined in the existing policy.

Parks does not have a current proposal for any new mountain bike trails although there is a neighborhood group associated with the Cheasty Greenbelt that will likely propose trail(s) in that area if the policy is updated. Parks does not have the staff capability to design and construct any new trails so we will look to an established group to design, build and maintain any new trail, with Parks' review, oversight and approval. In addition, it will be expected that any new mountain bike trail will also be used by forest stewards to undertake restoration work in addition to any trail construction.

### **Policy Description and Background**

Mountain bicycles, i.e. those bicycles that are designed to be ridden on soft surface trails, now come in all shapes and sizes. From 16" wheeled kid's bikes with knobby tires to bicycles with front and rear suspension design exclusively for going downhill. The lexicon of the mountain bike is such that there is a bicycle, style of riding and a trail for everyone although not necessarily all in the same area.

Surrounding Seattle, the availability of mountain bike trails has increased exponentially in the last twenty years. The vast majority of these trails were existing hiking trails that have been improved with varying degrees of success to accommodate mountain bikes into the mix of users. St. Edwards State Park and Big Finn Hill Park in Kenmore is an excellent example of a trail system that has been opened up to accommodate bicycles in most areas. A recent trend is to design and construct trails specifically for mountain bikes and riders; Duthie Hill Park, a King County Park, is a local example of trails that are purpose built for bikes although pedestrians are not precluded and the neighbors do access the trails on foot.

As the state of technology associated with bike has changed, so have trail standards and design principles. The International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) is the leader in trail design standards that are used by land managers not just in the US but worldwide. IMBA's book *Trail Solutions; IMBA's Guide to Building Sweet Single Track* is the prime resource for trail design standards. Interestingly, hiking trail standards have evolved in parallel with mountain biking trail standards as everyone is seeking to design trails that are sustainable over a long period of time that do not require significant amounts of maintenance. As an example, water bars used to be the method of choice for moving water off of a trail to prevent erosion. The construction of a water bar required the placement of wood or other material across the trail. Recent trail standards have moved away from water bars to a more simple solution of a dip in the trail to move water away from the trail tread. Parks' own trail standards already include a drainage dip to move water off a trail.

Within the City of Seattle, opportunities for mountain bike riding are limited to multi-use trails and I-5 Colonnade. While Colonnade contains purpose built mountain bike trails, the trails are difficult and can be off-putting to beginners and children. To date, Parks existing policy has generally precluded bicycles from park trails that in other jurisdictions may be open to bicycles. Until recently there has only been limited demand for expanded trail access even though the numbers of people taking part in mountain biking as a recreational activity continue to increase. The proposed update to Parks' Bicycle Policy and subsequent adoption of mountain bike trail standards would be an acceptance of mountain bikes as a legitimate recreational use within our park system. Trails can be designed and constructed in such a way that they can be used safely

by a variety of users in a way that will not be detrimental to the natural environment. As trails are envisioned, designed and constructed, there should be a group that will “own” the trails. Parks’ trail crew has limited resources that are focused predominantly on maintaining our existing trails so Parks will look to volunteers for the establishment of any new mountain bike trails. To the extent trails will be located in natural areas (Greenbelts) these trails will also provide access for our forest stewards to undertake restoration work. Mountain bike trail proponents will also be expected to assist with any existing and/or future restoration in the subject area. Finally, trails should be equitably distributed throughout the city to the extent practicable.

In conversations with Parks’ trails staff, many of our existing trail standards are consistent with established and accepted mountain bike trail standards. To the extent that Parks’ existing trail standards do not cover a specific situation, Parks will look to IMBA’s *Trail Solutions* and the trail proponent to design a trail that is sustainable and will not adversely impact the area where it is proposed.

### **Public Involvement Process**

There will be a public hearing on October 10<sup>th</sup> on the proposed policy updates. Part of the policy update includes a provision that there be a public hearing on any new proposed trail. Any new trail proposal would also follow Parks’ established public involvement policy.

### **Issues**

The central issue is acknowledging mountain bikes as a legitimate recreational use and accommodating that use in a way that balances access and restoration. People treasure the green associated with Parks’ Greenbelts and Natural Areas even though they are home to invasive species and illegal and illicit activities. Encouraging positive recreational activities and fostering stewardship and restoration activities can have a beneficial impact, both socially and ecologically.

### **Environmental Sustainability**

Any new trail would have to be sustainable; volunteers would be expected to undertake restoration efforts as well as trail construction to help further the work of the Green Seattle Partnership.

**Budget**

Adoption of the policy updates does not have any budget implications to the Department. Since the expectation is that any subsequent new trails will be constructed by volunteers, budget impacts should be limited. As individual trail project(s) move forward, long term budget implications will be a component of the project review.

**Schedule**

Following this briefing and tonight's public hearing the Board is scheduled to review make its recommendation at its November 14<sup>th</sup> meeting. If the Board recommends approval the Superintendent would review and likely approve the Policy shortly thereafter.

**Additional Information**

For more information, you can contact David Graves at [david.graves@seattle.gov](mailto:david.graves@seattle.gov).